FBI used informer to stir Panther trouble--lawyer

By Rob Warden

The stated purpose of the fatal Black Panther raid by State's Atty. Edward V. Hanrahan's men here in 1969 was to seize weapons.

And weapons were seized — 19 of them, including a sawed-off shotgun and a stolen police riot gun, along with about 1,300 rounds of ammunition.

The weapons were widely publicized right after the raid and again 2½ years later when Hanrahan and 13 other officials were tried in a state court and officially cleared of wrongdoing in the raid deaths of Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark.

BUT IT WASN'T known at the time of the trial that the Black Panther Party member whose duty was to secure "an operable weapon" for every Panther in Chicago was a paid informer-provocateur for the FBI. His name was William O'Neal.

A glimpse at how the FBI used O'Neal was offered Wednesday when a Panther lawyer, in his opening statement at the trial of a $47.7 million federal damage suit, read one sentence fragment from a memo purportedly sent by the Chicago FBI office to J. Edgar Hoover:

"Above furnished for information of Bureau (FBI) and an indication of the use of this source (O'Neal) in harassing and impelling the criminal activities of the Black Panther Party."

After reading the passage to the six-member civil jury, Panther lawyer James D. Montgomery deliberately defined the key word:

"Impelling — causing to happen."

Montgomery charged that the FBI provoked criminal activities as part of a Hoover-ordered program to discredit, misdirect and neutralize the Panthers — a program that in Chicago may have culminated in the fatal Dec. 4 raid.

THE RAID, said Montgomery, was the product of a conspiracy hatched by the FBI to deprive Panthers of their constitutional rights to life, legal counsel, due process of law and freedom from unreasonable search and seizure.

Not once in his two-hour opening statement, however, did Montgomery use the word "murder," which Panthers so often have shouted at Hanrahan.

Instead, the noted Chicago civil rights lawyer told the jury that one of the raiders, Joseph Gorman, sprayed the wall of Fred Hampton's bedroom with a 40-shot burst of machinegun bullets.

Then, according to Montgomery, Gorman asked fellow raider George Jones to check the bullets. "Jones told him, 'They're comin' through,'" Montgomery said.

But when this didn't kill Hampton, Montgomery contended, one of the unknown raiders stood over the 21-year-old Panther leader's bed and fired two shots into his brain.

"He's good and dead now," Montgomery accused that raider as boasting to a companion in a voice overheard by one of the survivors.

Montgomery labeled the raid "an intentional effort to destroy the Black Panther Party, its leaders and its members."

IN RESPONSE, one of Hanrahan's defense lawyers, Joseph Witkowski, told the jury that the conspiracy charge is "such an incredible allegation it's almost offensive to argue against it."

"We will show there was absolutely no conspiracy," Witkowski said. "There was co-operation."

He said the Panthers had an extreme propensity for violence. The party's newspaer, according to Witkowski, once informed members that no bail money would be provided for any Panther arrested without getting off at least one shot at the arresting officer.

Witkowski also told the jury that Panthers referred to police as "pigs" and quoted Hampton as once having said: "You kill one pig and you get a little satisfaction; you kill all the pigs and you get complete satisfaction."

ANOTHER defense lawyer, Camillo F. Volini, added that the Panthers were a Maoist group that believed all political power came from the barrel of a gun.

"They were not just a bunch of idealistic youngsters," Volini said. "It was a street gang composed of vicious individuals."